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# The Extraordinary Feminine Nature in Anne Richter's Fantastic Stories\*

## Niezwykłość kobiecej natury w opowiadaniach fantastycznych Anne Richter

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**Abstract.** The objective of this article is to examine how the classic fantastic motif of metamorphosis is used by Anne Richter, a Belgian writer and theorist of women's fantastic, not only to arouse fear in the reader but also to raise women's issues, particularly marriage. Using studies by fantastic literature theorists (including Labbé, Millet, Malrieu, Prince and Richter), as well as feminist critique texts (Cixous, de Beauvoir, Kristeva), the author analyses the motif of metamorphosis in two of Richter's stories – *Sul passo dell'Arno* [*Over the Arno Pass*] and *Un sommeil de plante* [*The Sleep of Plants*] – showing the interweaving of classic elements of a fantastic work with the “extraordinary nature of women” and their womanhood.

**Keywords:** Anne Richter, women's fantastic, the motif of metamorphosis, extraordinariness, women's nature, womanhood

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**Abstrakt.** Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie, w jaki sposób klasyczny motyw fantastyczny metamorfozy jest wykorzystany przez Anne Richter, belgijską pisarkę i teoretyczkę fantastyki kobiecej, nie tylko do wzbudzenia strachu u czytelnika, ale także do poruszenia tematyki kobiecej, w szczególności małżeństwa. Korzystając z opracowań teoretyków literatury fantastycznej (m.in. Labbé, Millet, Malrieu, Prince, Richter) oraz tekstów krytyki feministycznej (Cixous, de Beauvoir, Kristeva), autorka artykułu poddaje analizie motyw metamorfozy w *Sul passo dell'Arno* i *Un sommeil de plante* – dwóch opowiadaniach Richter, wskazując przeplatanie się klasycznych elementów utworu fantastycznego z „niezwykłą naturą kobiety” i jej kobiecością.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Anne Richter, fantastyka kobieca, motyw metamorfozy, niezwykłość, natura kobieca, kobiecość

Fantastic literature appears to be a genre dominated by men. Created primarily by men, it focuses on the male figure and his struggle with a “supernatural phenomenon.”<sup>1</sup> Although even classic 19<sup>th</sup>-century fantastic literature permits the presence of a woman in the hermetic world it depicts, the female figure, if at all appearing in a fantastic work, usually takes on the role of a “passive victim” or becomes the embodiment of an all-powerful “fantastic phenomenon” (Malrieu, 1992, p. 60). In classic, “masculine” fantastic literature, the woman appears either as a trivial, meaningless element, or as a disturbing, yet fascinating threat – she often seduces the protagonist, her victim, leading him to perdition, condemning him to death or mental illness (Gadomska, 2009, p. 78).

It is only contemporary fantastic literature,<sup>2</sup> which also includes women writers, which shows a more varied female figure and thus becomes more “feminine.” It is worth noting, however, that the term “women’s fantastic” is not only meant to emphasise that it is created by women. Defining it in this way would be a mental shortcut and would imply “unconditional biological determinism” (Borkowska, 2001, p. 70). Not only are women the authors of fantastic works, but they frequently introduce a leading female character, and, above all, they deal with topics closely related to her complex female nature in quite a specific way. Anne Richter (1995, p. 10) notes: “Women [...] have the art of speaking *differently*. They have the privilege of thinking other than with reason: they use their body, their instincts, their memories, or that imponderable that we have agreed to call the soul” [“Les femmes [...] ont l’art de parler *autrement*.

<sup>1</sup> According to Joël Malrieu (1992, p. 49), fantasy is a kind of confrontation of the protagonist or “character” [*personage*] with a supernatural element, or “phenomenon” [*phénomène*]. The terminology proposed by Malrieu is also used by Polish literary researchers, including Małgorzata Niziołek (2005) and Katarzyna Gadomska (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Contemporary fantasy of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is often referred to as “new fantastic” or “neo-fantastic,” especially by French scholars (Baronian, 1977; Morin, 1996; Goimard, 2003; Gadomska, 2012).

Elles détiennent le privilège de penser autrement qu'avec la raison : en utilisant leur corps, leurs instincts, leurs souvenirs, ou cet impondérable qu'il est convenu d'appeler l'âme"]. Richter directly confirms the words of Hélène Cixous (2001, pp. 168–187), who in *The Laugh of the Medusa* states that what is feminine is also undefined, unordered, mysterious and wild. The very criterion of gender is therefore derived from the assumption of women's exceptional sensitivity – spontaneous and sensual. This is emphasised both by Jean-Baptiste Baronian (2007, p. 263) and Jeanine Moulin (1981), the author of the article *Cent cinquante ans de littérature féminine* [*One Hundred and Fifty Years of Feminine Literature*]. Moreover, in her article, Moulin notes that Belgian women writers in particular are able to combine playing with fear and uniqueness with "precision of language and meticulous descriptions, which make the uniqueness convincing" ["une façon d'intégrer le surnaturel dans un récit que la clarté de l'exposé et la minutie de l'observation rendent crédibles"] (1981, p. 62).

One of the most interesting French-language Belgian writers of women's fantastic, as well as its researcher and theorist, was Anne Richter (1939–2019). Richter may be said to have had writing in her blood – she was the daughter of poet Roger Bodart and Maria-Theresa Bodart, a writer whose works also touch upon fantastic literature. Richter herself (2011, pp. 156–163) described her mother's work as women's fantastic. Her most important works include collections of short stories, *La Fourmi a fait le coup* [*The Ant Did It*] (published in 1955, she wrote this collection at the age of fifteen), *Les locataires* (1967) and *Le Chat Lucian* [*The Lucian Cat*] (2010).

In her works, Richter was fascinated by the mysterious meanders of the human soul. She often focused on the relationships arising between a woman and other people, her body, nature, or objects that surrounded her (Lysøe, 2010, p. 109). As Ryszard Siwek (2001, p. 168) emphasizes, "A. Richter creates a fantastic reality, justifying its veracity with a sensitivity different from that of men in the way she perceives and understands the world. Her fantastic is more allusive and speculative" ["A. Richter kreuje rzeczywistość fantastyczną, uzasadniając jej prawdziwość odmienną od męskiej wrażliwością w sposobie postrzegania i rozumienia świata. Jej fantastyka jest bardziej aluzyjna i spekulatywna"]. In her works, the female protagonists are "an integral part of the depicted world, while at the same time being the element that determines the uniqueness of the whole" ["integralną częścią świata przedstawionego, będąc jednocześnie tym jego elementem, który przesądza o niezwykłości całości"] (Siwek, 2001, p. 169). Although the writer's fantastic writings may be described as psychological fantastic or fantastic of the interior, since it is born of often deeply hidden fears and obsessions (Richter, 2011, pp. 164–164), it is difficult to find in them the characteristic of "playing with fear," the characteristic of classic fantastic literature (Wydmuch, 1975; Wandzioch, 2001).

Two fantasy stories by Richter from the *Les locataires* collection, *Sul passo dell'Arno* [Over the Arno Pass] and *Un sommeil de plante* [The Sleep of Plants] are seemingly similar stories based on the classic motif of metamorphosis. Their protagonists lose their human form in unexplained ways. The newly married Marie from *Sul passo dell'Arno* turns into a cat in order to escape her daily married life, whereas the phlegmatic Ania from *Un sommeil de plante*, wishing to avoid marrying her fiancé, finds her happiness by turning into a tree. It is worth recalling that the motif of metamorphosis appears very frequently in fantastic literature. Despite its heterogeneity, as Renata Bizek-Tatara (2016, p. 109) notes, we can list its two main categories: the transformation of a human into an animal, plant, mineral or monster, or the transformation of the inhuman into a human. In the aforementioned works, we can find the first category of metamorphosis.

It should be noted, however, that, contrary to the conventions of the genre, it is not the women's fantastic transformation that brings about their doom, but their relationship with a man. The analysis of the aforementioned transformations in Richter's stories is an attempt to prove that the author uses a classic fantastic motif not only to provide the reader with pleasant entertainment, arousing their fear by depicting a supernatural element, but also to examine the female existence.

### THE ANIMAL METAMORPHOSIS OF THE WOMAN

The story *Sul passo dell'Arno*, using the technique of gradation (Millet and Labbé, 2005, p. 320; Gadomska, 2012, p. 226), tells the story of a young married woman's transformation into a cat in a traditional way. However, the first-person male narration, describing her transformation from the husband's point of view, only seemingly indicates that the protagonist of the story is a man. In fact, it is completely focused on the female character, who quickly turns out to be the protagonist. The narrator, confining himself to a casual account of a honeymoon in Italy, focuses primarily on his feelings for his wife and on depicting her terrifying transformation into an animal.

According to genre conventions, Marie is portrayed by the husband-narrator as a supernaturally beautiful and ideal being: "For three days I had been married to the most exquisite creature imaginable. You know how beautiful Marie was, but for me, she was even more beautiful. I loved her madly" ["J'étais, depuis trois jours, le mari de la plus exquise créature qu'on pût imaginer. Vous savez combien Marie était belle, mais pour moi, elle était encore plus belle. Je l'aimais à la folie"] (Richter, 1967a, p. 29).

On the other hand, however, the husband-narrator also notices disturbing features of her physiognomy, betraying her animal nature: “The next day we got up late [...] Marie stretched and yawned, exposing her sharp fangs” [“Nous nous levâmes tard le lendemain. [...] Marie s’étira et bâilla en découvrant des canines aiguës”] (Richter, 1967a, p. 32). Her behaviour during a walk through the streets of Florence, typical of a predatory cat and not of a young woman, seems ominous to him:

She chased after the pigeons that ran away unhurriedly, waddling on their short legs. She caught one by the neck and suddenly the glow in her eyes flared, she squeezed the silky ball between her fingers, and the more the beast struggled, the harder she squeezed. I took her arm and pulled her away: – “Leave the beast alone. You’re going to strangle it.” – She looked at me, astonished. She shook her head like an animal deprived of its prey. (Richter, 1967a, p. 33)<sup>3</sup>

Although he sees the strange signs betraying her extraordinary animal nature, sometimes full of cruelty, the narrator nevertheless ignores them:

Under the local sun, which animates everything, her yellow eyes became golden, her sprightly gait resembled a dance, her braids were like snakes. [...] The little Gorgon took pleasure in smiling her wild and mysterious smile. (Richter, 1967a, pp. 29–31)<sup>4</sup>

The comparison to Medusa itself highlights not only Marie’s inhuman nature, but also her husband’s unwise fascination with her, and reveals the risk of danger that lurks in her vicinity.

For the husband-narrator, however, she is so physically attractive and has such a captivating power of seduction, that he ignores all the warning signs that can be seen in her appearance and behaviour. As a result, when his wife transforms into a cat, he almost loses his life:

Something weighed on my chest, choking me, blowing hot air in my face. I opened my eyes and leapt up just in time to parry two rows of sharp claws that would have gone straight into my eyes [...]. The steel claws lacerated me; sharp teeth tore at me. (Richter, 1967a, p. 38)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Elle courait après les pigeons qui se sauvaient sans hâte, en se dandinant sur leurs courtes pattes. Elle en attrapa un par le cou et, soudainement, la lueur de ses yeux devint brasier, elle serait entre ses doigts la boule soyeuse, plus la bête s’agitait, plus elle serait. Je lui pris le bras et la tirai: – « Laisse cette bête. Tu vas l’étouffer. Elle me regarda, étonnée ». – Elle secoua la tête avec éternement, comme un animal qu’on prive de sa proie.”

<sup>4</sup> “Sous le soleil de là-bas qui anime tout, ses yeux jaunes devinrent dorés, sa démarche souple fut danse, les tresses de ses cheveux comme des serpents. [...] La petite gorgone souriait de plaisir, de son sourire sauvage et secret.”

<sup>5</sup> “Quelque chose pesait sur ma poitrine, m’étouffait, me soufflait un air brûlant au visage. J’ouvris les yeux et je bondis juste à temps pour parer deux rangées de griffes acérées qui allaient m’entraîner droit dans les yeux. [...] Des griffes d’acier me lacéraient, des dents pointues me fouillaient [...]”

Richter's story brings the motifs of Eros and Thanatos into coexistence, which frequently happens in fantastic literature. However, in contrast to classic, "male" fantastic, it is not the man who falls victim to the beautiful woman who, being seemingly human, quickly turns out to be a dangerous animal – a "fantastic phenomenon." In the final battle, contrary to the rules governing traditional fantastic, the "character" defeats the "phenomenon," because it is Marie, in her feline form, who loses her life:

and I understood then, I understood where this woman's charm and danger came from, she was a cat through and through [...] which I finally grabbed by the throat and threw on the pillow, the eyes glassy, her open mouth revealing white teeth. (Richter, 1967a, p. 38)<sup>6</sup>

For Marie, marriage quickly turns out to be captivity, a forced submission to a man, even a curse. Unlike her husband, the protagonist, despite being married for only a short time and being on her honeymoon, does not feel happy as a married woman, which she reproaches him for after only three days in Florence:

With a woman, the storm is always waiting for an opportunity to erupt. I learned who I was, that I lacked tact, decorum, the slightest bit of intuition that is the first form of intelligence. Wherever we went, I had forced her to stay in places that she wanted to flee from right away and, on the other hand, I brutally took her away from places she wanted to linger. [...] During our marriage, I treated her with revolting condescension in front of her friends. She was no longer free; she could feel it. (Richter, 1967a, pp. 35–36)<sup>7</sup>

As Simone de Beauvoir notes in *The Second Sex* [*Druga płeć*] (2014, p. 585\*): "The drama of marriage is not that it does not guarantee the wife the promised happiness – there is no guarantee of happiness – it is that it mutilates her; it dooms to repetition and routine" ["Tragedia mężatki polega nie na tym, że małżeństwo nie zapewnia jej szczęścia, które wróży – szczęścia nic nie może zapewnić – ale na tym, że małżeństwo ogranicza kobietę, skazując na powtarzanie i monotonię"] (2014, p. 561).

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<sup>6</sup> "et je compris alors, je compris ce qui faisait le charme et le danger de cette femme, elle était chatte jusqu'au bout des ongles [...] que je saisis finalement à la gorge et que je rejetai sur l'oreiller, les yeux vitreux, la gueule ouverte sur des dents blanches."

<sup>7</sup> "Avec une femme, l'orage n'attend jamais que l'occasion pour éclater. J'apprenais qui j'étais, que je manquais de tact, de tenue, de la plus petite parcelle de cette intuition qui est la première forme de l'intelligence. Partout où nous étions passés, je l'avais forcée à s'attarder dans des lieux qu'elle avait eu envie de fuir dès le premier coup d'œil et, par contre, je l'avais brutalement enlevée à des atmosphères dont elle eût envie s'imprégner à son aise. [...] Pendant le mariage, je l'avais traitée devant ses amis avec une condescendance révoltant. Elle n'était plus libre, elle le sentait bien."



Marie's nighttime transformation into a cat, although seemingly an aggressive attack on her husband, is probably the only way she can free herself from him and from marital "bondage." The feline character seems to be the embodiment of her true, unfettered female nature. She is spontaneous, inexplicable, and wild. However, the price Marie has to pay for trying to regain her woman's freedom is the highest – she loses her life at the hands of her husband: "She was dead, no doubt, quite dead, I hope..." ["Elle était morte, sans doute, bien morte, je l'espère..."] (Richter, 1967a, p. 29).

For the analysed story, its ending, different than in classic fantastic, is significant. Marie, transforming into a cat, becomes an incarnation of the woman-phenomenon (*femme-phénomène*). She thus initially falls within the paradigm of the fantasy *femme fatale* (Gadomska, 2009, pp. 78–79): through her metamorphosis, she seems to be in opposition to the character – the male figure. However, contrary to the rules of the genre, it is she who ultimately loses the fight with him and it is not the transformation of the protagonist, but the particular dimension of her enslavement by marriage that arouses the reader's concern. The story goes beyond the usual scheme of classic fantastic convention, which focuses primarily on arousing fear in the reader through the introduction of a supernatural element. As a result, Richter's short story encourages the reader to reflect more deeply on the essence of marriage, and consequently to read it in a completely different – female – way.

## THE PLANT METAMORPHOSIS OF THE WOMAN

Ania, the protagonist of the story *Un sommeil de plante*, appears to be a completely different type of woman. Overflowing with inexplicable melancholy, she is more like a defenceless and innocent victim than a demonic *femme fatale*.<sup>8</sup>

She lived like a plant. The rhythms of her life were more vegetable than human. She was prone, periodically, to sliding slowly into sleep; she remained inactive, immobile, hands crossed on knees, head tilted slightly toward one shoulder, staring straight ahead. (Richter / trans. Gauvin, 2015, p. 131)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It is worth recalling that such a vision of a woman also fits into the convention of fantastic literature (Malrieu, 1992, p. 60).

<sup>9</sup> "Elle vivait comme une plante. Son rythme de vie était plus végétal qu'humain. Elle était sujette par époques à de lentes endormissements: elle demeurait inactive, immobile, les mains croisées sur les genoux, la tête légèrement inclinée sur l'épaule, à regarder devant elle" (Richter, 1967b, p. 71) (Anne Richter, *The Sleep of Plants*. Trans. Edward Gauvin. In: Ann VanderMeer, Jeff VanderMeer (eds.), *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology*, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2015, p. 131 [next as: Richter / trans. Gauvin, 2015, p. x]).



Moreover, as in the case of other fantastic literature protagonists (Prince, 2008, p. 82; Malrieu, 1992, p. 56), her life is filled with solitude and alienation: “She sank into utter solitude, surrounding herself with a rampart of silence” (Richter / trans. Gauvin, 2015, p. 132) [“Elle semblait dans une solitude absolue, s’entourant d’un rempart de silence”] (Richter, 1967b, p. 71). Her life seems to be an abyss of sadness, a melancholy that causes her to “lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself”<sup>10</sup> [“utraty smaku mowy, jakiegokolwiek działania, a nawet smaku życia”] (Kristeva, 2007, p. 5). At the same time, however, her breakdown, separation from reality is her obvious choice, glaring and inescapable (Kristeva, 2007, p. 5):

Bitterness flooded her, disgust. She believed herself the only living person in a dead world shaken by sound and fury, till the day she understood: in motionlessness, movement found its source. She decided to fall silent, and in silence, animate the world. (Richter / trans. Gauvin, 2015, p. 133)<sup>11</sup>

Superficially, her condition may be changed by her engagement to George, a young man of good breeding. It is during one of their walks together that Ania recovers her energy, only to quickly lose it again when her fiancé tries to get close to her, kissing her unexpectedly:

She reached the first trunk and threw her arms around it; her fiancé caught up and kissed her on the mouth. [...] But suddenly she felt faint, and her hands gripped the bark. [...] They stopped going for walks. Her fiancé tried to drag her along, but she stubbornly refused, pleading fatigue. (Richter / trans. Gauvin, 2015, pp. 132–133)<sup>12</sup>

Ania’s engagement period quickly becomes the main catalyst of her transformation into a plant. This inexplicable plant metamorphosis seems to be her conscious decision and simultaneously an escape<sup>13</sup> from her marriage to George:

This is what she did: she found a giant stoneware pot, a great bag of humus. She stepped into the basin, covered her legs in a blanket of earth. [...] When her fiancé came to see her, he didn’t know what to say. [...] – You always said you wanted me to be happy, she murmured. – Probably you never

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<sup>10</sup> Translation by: Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 3, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>11</sup> “L’amertume la submergeait, le dégoût. Elle croyait être la seule vivante, dans un monde mort, ébranlé par le bruit et la fureur, jusqu’au jour où elle comprit: dans l’immobilité, le mouvement trouve sa source. Elle décida de se taire, dans le silence d’animer le monde” (Richter, 1967b, p. 74).

<sup>12</sup> “Elle atteignit le premier tronc qu’elle enlaça; son fiancé la rejoignit et l’embrassa sur la bouche. [...] Mais elle fut prise tout à coup de malaise et ses mains agrippèrent l’écorce. [...] Ils ne firent plus de promenades. Son fiancé voulut entraîner, elle refusa obstinément, prétextant la fatigue” (Richter, 1967b, pp. 72–73).

<sup>13</sup> It thus resembles the transformation of the mythical nymph Daphne, fleeing from Apollo’s courtship.

noticed that I was unhappy. This had to happen sooner or later. Isn't it better that it happened before we got married? (Richter / trans. Gauvin, 2015, p. 134)<sup>14</sup>

Ania's transformation into a tree does not pose any danger to the protagonists of the story. It is devoid of horror and does not arouse fear in the reader. It rather resembles a disease, after which the heroine finds her happiness by transforming into a tree. This metamorphosis seems to give her the freedom she wanted as much as the protagonist of *Sul passo dell'Arno*. De Beauvoir writes about the fear of marriage and attempts to avoid it (2014, pp. 514–515\*):

At the same time as she desires it, however, a girl is often apprehensive of marriage. [...] In other cases, the girl wilfully falls into a protracted illness; she becomes desperate because her state keeps her from marrying the man "she adores:" in fact, she makes herself ill to avoid marrying him and finds her balance only by breaking her engagement.<sup>15</sup>

What is interesting, however, is that despite Ania's transformation into a tree and the breaking of the engagement, as well as the fact that George is getting married to another woman, the paths of the engaged couple do not diverge. To make sure they always stay close, George plants the transformed Ania in his garden, where she blossoms, finding her happiness:

– Look... I've given this a lot of thought. I think I owe it to you to tell you this. I've met someone... a young woman, the sister of someone at work. She's sweet, serious-minded... she looks like you a bit. You're the one who told me life goes on. But I can't just abandon you. Our lives are intertwined, Ania: do you want to come to our wedding, come live with us? [...] George planted her in his yard, in the middle of the lawn. The roots breathed freely; she thanked him with a happy nod of foliage. [...] That summer, the tree put forth splendid blossoms. (Richter / trans. Gauvin, 2015, p. 136)<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "Voilà comment elle procéda: elle prit un vaste pot de grès, un grand sac d'humus. Elle entra dans la vasque, recouvrit ses jambes d'un manteau de terre. [...] Quand son fiancé vint la voir il ne sut que dire. [...] – Tu m'as toujours dit, murmura-t-elle, – que tu voulais mon bonheur. Sans doute ne t'étais-tu pas rendu compte que j'étais malheureuse ? Tôt ou tard, cela devait arriver. Ne valait-il pas mieux que cela se passe avant le mariage ?" (Richter 1967b, pp. 75–76).

<sup>15</sup> "Trzeba wszakże dodać, że pragnąc małżeństwa, dziewczyna jednocześnie odczuwa przed nim trwogę. [...] Czasem dziewczyna szuka ucieczki w chronicznej chorobie. Na pozór jest w rozpacz, że zdrowie nie pozwala jej wyjść za człowieka, »którego ubóstwia«, ale w rzeczywistości jest to ucieczka w chorobę przed małżeństwem; dziewczyna odzyskuje równowagę dopiero po zerwaniu zaręczyn" (de Beauvoir, 2014, pp. 490–491).

<sup>16</sup> "– Écoute, j'ai beaucoup hésité. Je crois de mon devoir de t'en parler. J'ai rencontré une jeune fille, la sœur d'un collègue... Elle est jeune, douce, sérieuse. Elle te ressemble un peu. C'est toi-même qui m'as dit que la vie continue... Cependant, je ne peux pas t'abandonner. Nos vies sont mêlées, Anie: veux-tu venir chez nous, veux-tu assister à mon mariage ? [...] Georges la planta dans son jardin, au cœur de la pelouse. Les racines respirèrent, elle remercia d'une heureuse inclination de la cime. [...] Cet été-là, la floraison de l'arbre fut splendide" (Richter, 1967b, pp. 78–79).

Metamorphosis into a tree seems to be salvation for Ania, who does not want to submit to social expectations, and at the same time allows her to maintain her autonomy while continuing her relationship with the man she has been involved with.

As in the case of *Sul passo dell'Arno*, the supernatural element in the analysed story enables the introduction of a female theme. Ania's mysterious, inexplicable metamorphosis does not arouse fear in the reader, but rather makes them reflect on the condition of being a woman. *Un sommeil de plante*, focusing on the slow transformation of the protagonist and the emotions that accompany it, also shows that contemporary fantastic literature does not necessarily have to be just literature of fear, which the reader reaches for while looking for only entertainment.

### THE FANTASTIC OF WOMEN'S FREEDOM

Both analysed stories contain elements of both classic fantastic literature and those that go beyond the convention of the genre, which significantly contributes to its refreshment. The typical features of fantastic in *Sul passo dell'Arno* and *Un sommeil de plante* include showing a woman as a passive victim or a demonic *femme fatale* and using classic writing techniques (gradation technique, warning signs), as well as the motif of the protagonists' metamorphoses, through which they both become a "fantastic phenomenon." What makes the analysed texts different from their classic fantastic counterparts is primarily the lack of a conventional ending, which is usually the character's defeat in a clash with a supernatural element. What is more, it is not the mysterious and fearful transformation of the protagonists of Richter's stories that is the source of fear and anxiety for the reader, but their relationships with men. The metamorphoses of Marie and Ania have a positive dimension, as it allows them to free themselves from the unbearable monotony of everyday life. The extraordinary nature of the protagonists, which is, in fact, their unhindered femininity, gives them freedom. As a result, their metamorphoses and uncommon femininity, in opposition to the rules governing traditional fantastic literature, have nothing repugnant or scary about them.

It is worth recalling that de Beauvoir (2014, p. 506), writing about marriage in *The Second Sex*, notes that it: "has always been presented in radically different ways for men and for women. The two sexes are necessary for each other, but this necessity has never fostered reciprocity" ["zawsze miało zupełnie odmienny charakter dla kobiety niż dla mężczyzny. Obie płci są sobie wzajemnie niezbędne, ale ta niezbędność nie stworzyła między nimi równości"] (2014, p. 482). According to her (2014, p. 584): "It is said that marriage diminishes man: it is often true; but it almost always destroys woman" ["Małżeństwo często pomniejsza mężczyznę

– to prawda, lecz niemal zawsze sprowadza do zera kobietę”] (2014, p. 560). The protagonists of Richter’s stories analysed here seem to share Beauvoir’s opinion about getting married. Haunted by the indefinite existential emptiness and filled with frustration, they seem to live in detachment from reality and want to break with it completely (Baronian, 2007, p. 243). As a result, they both escape from the trivial everyday life and, above all, from marriage to a man, which should give them, according to established social norms, happiness in life.

This use of fantastic shows how much the female aspect can change it. It seems that it is not without reason that Anne Richter herself (1995, p. 11) stated that “only contemporary fantasy is truly feminine” [“seul le fantastique moderne est réellement féminin”]. Women’s fantastic literature, drawing on the classic elements of the genre, goes beyond its usual patterns. It is not only pleasant entertainment that plays with the reader’s fear, but it seems to encourage the reader to reflect more deeply on the condition of being a woman.

*Translated into English: Lingua Lab*

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